

J.R.D. Kirk's new volume, *Jesus Have I Loved, But Paul? A Narrative Approach to the Problem of Pauline Christianity*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), is on 'tour' around the blogs – or more precisely – around the biblioblogs.

I'm taking part but instead of reviewing the whole volume various of the bloggers are doing parts of it. My part is chapter 5- 'Judgment and Inclusion' because, let's face it, I know a good bit about the former and am not what my friends would describe as a fan of the latter.

Firstly- some general impressions of the chapter: it's well written, clear, readable, and enjoyable. Daniel is a fine author and a good, sensible, responsible, and reasonable thinker.

However that shouldn't lead readers of this particular partial review (and please keep that in mind- this is a review of only one segment of a longer work) to the opinion that I don't find parts of Kirk's argument problematic.

He asserts, for example, that 'Jesus came to form communities' (p. 97). Did he? Or do the evangelists do the forming for him? Did Jesus really come to drive a wedge between one segment of Judaism and another or did he in fact come to bring various fragments of Judaism back to the One God, his Father and theirs? Was Jesus a 'community builder'? Some sort of first century Jewish 'community organizer' who wanted to make the world a better place? I don't think so (and to be sure, Kirk doesn't say as much). However, the notion that Jesus 'came to form communities' is a misreading of the Historical Jesus (even if a proper reading of his disciples' intentions).

Secondly, his image of Jesus is excessively 'soft' and inexact. While he does recognize that Jesus instructs his disciples not to 'condemn' (I wish people would understand the difference between condemnation of sinners and discrimination between good and evil actions), he misses a very fine opportunity to balance his view of Jesus with a remembrance of the cleansing of the Temple in which Jesus does in fact 'judge' by driving out the wicked thieves occupying the Temple markets. Still, along the same lines, he notes that the 5th verse of Matthew 7 is followed by the 6th verse which prohibits casting pearls to pigs.

He says of Mt 7:6- '...this difficult passage... warns us against too facile an adoption of the notion that we are not to assess the people around us' (p. 98).

Unfortunately his treatment of this saying of Jesus concerning the 'casting of pearls before swine' is weakened by the fact that he takes no recourse to the underlying (putative) Aramaic saying. And why is it 'difficult'? It certainly isn't difficult to understand, either as it sits in Greek or as it stands in Aramaic. Is it difficult because those who renounce 'judgment' (understood as what, exactly?) simply don't like it?

Daniel also mentions Mt 7:15-16, 20 in connection with his interest in ‘judgment’. ‘Later in the same chapter, Jesus once again demands that we judge. … At its best, judgment is an act of loving protection for the family of God’ (p. 99). And while there’s certainly nothing wrong with that per se, it is a bit odd if one is the recipient of that judgment. Such persons wouldn’t feel very loved- any more than a tumor excised from a human body would feel loved if it were cut out and tossed into the bio-hazard trash bin. Judgment demands exclusion. Jesus demands exclusion. And I think Kirk understands that. He writes ‘Jesus came not to proclaim that everyone is part of the family of God… but to form that family around himself’ (p. 100).

That last sentence sounds nice, doesn’t it. Unfortunately, it’s wrong. Specifically, the last phrase. Jesus doesn’t seek to form anything around himself- he seeks to form a people of God around God, the Father. Kirk’s (apparently Barthian) Christocentrism has led him astray. Jesus was theocentric to the core. His will was to do the will of the Father. Nothing less, and nothing more. For Jesus, it wasn’t about Jesus. It was about the Father.

Thirdly, Kirk depends far too much on the scholarship of N.T. Wright in his discussion of justification. He would be better suited to review the work of Douglas Campbell, who has shown, convincingly, not only that Wright is Wrong, but that much New Testament scholarship has washed ashore on the wrong island of justification theory.

Fourthly, and I realize this is just a personal pet peeve, but in reviews we reviewers review from our own points of view, Kirk uses the words ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ far too frequently. For instance, on pages 104-107 (only counting half of page 104 and three quarters of page 107) Kirk mentions ‘story’ and ‘narrative’ a mind numbingly repetitious 22 times. I recognize that story and narrative are the favorite buzzwords these days (to my eternal annoyance) but that seems excessive. I’ve not counted the uses of those words throughout the volume but I can well image that they total in the thousands.

Fifthly, Kirk overlooks some VERY important scholarship. So, for instance, instead of depending so heavily on Wright and Hays, Kirk should have consulted Campbell and Markus Barth (whose commentary on Ephesians would have helped him immensely in his ‘Breaking Down our Dividing Walls’ section).

Sixthly, Kirk makes claims that have no basis in historical fact or evidence. On page 111, for example, he writes ‘As the first person to take the Gospel across cultural boundaries… [Paul]…’ How exactly does Kirk know that Paul was the first person to do such a thing? How did the Church in Rome, for example, begin? It certainly wasn’t through the missionary efforts of Paul. There were doubtless many who left Judea with the Gospel who crossed cultural boundaries while Paul was still in the desert for 15 years. But if we depend on Kirk here we get the impression that all the Greco-Roman world was

quietly waiting for Paul to come on the scene so they could hear the Gospel. And even worse, the entire Church was waiting for him too before it could begin to reach beyond the borders of Judaism.

And finally, seventhly, one of Kirk's concluding sentences is just a bit odd: '... the world outside of Christ is a world in some sense hostile to God' (p. 114). 'In some sense'? What a curious phrase given the clear implications in the Gospels that the world as 'organized organic system' is portrayed as utterly and thoroughly hostile to God! The world isn't hostile to God in 'some sense'. It is hostile to God in every sense!

And yet, in spite of these weaknesses, Kirk's argument is well made. He is most certainly correct when he asserts that '... we are not free to say that there is no dividing line between the family of God and those without...' (p. 114).

In sum, God both includes, and excludes. 'Simply being human is not enough to claim membership in the family of God' (p. 114). Though, Kirk goes on to suggest, we may all be surprised one day to discover who really is 'in' and who really is 'out'. I concur.

I've engaged Dan's work so intently because it deserves close attention, and not because I've found reading it unfruitful. Quite the contrary. I hope others will read it as closely because if they do, they'll learn a good bit.

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